

# IT COSTS LESS TO EDUCATE THAN INCARCERATE

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Link: <https://prisonwriters.com/educate-not-incarcerate/>

The United States has roughly 2.3 million people incarcerated.

An approximate average expenditure of \$36,000 a year per prisoner translates to around \$80 billion on corrections annually. U.S. Department of Education budgetary statistics indicate the U.S. spends three times more on reacting to crime than on education. The comparison is not whimsical. Marc Mauer noted in 1994 that some main factors contributing to crime are, "poverty, drug abuse, poor education, and family breakdown." He went on to say "[A]ddressing these problems should have more of an impact on crime than continuing to expand the prison population." After almost 30 years of intense, mass incarceration while crime rates remained, more or less, at pre-boom figures. No honest person can deny that fact today.

Later, in that some people, Mauer examines "three key issues" that reveal why incarceration has such a "modest impact on crime."

1. The "Criminal Justice Funnel";
2. The Impact of Demographics;
3. The "Replacement" Effect<sup>5</sup>

These last two are most consequential to addressing crime today.

Looking at demographics, two things are unavoidable: criminals "age out" of deviant behavior, and 15-18-year-old males have the highest incidence of criminality. These correlate because six years after the "15-18 criminality onset" incidence rates drop to half then, each succeeding year, the probability of crime continues to decrease, diminishing societal benefits of incarceration to almost none. The "Replacement" effect also relates because, unless the underlying conditions that contribute to crime are addressed, the need for greater incapacitation and more mass

incarceration will persist as each new generation reinitiates the “15-18 criminality onset”.

Tough on crime does not work. This is why policymakers have changed gears to “smart on crime.” Smart on crime means addressing poverty, drug abuse, poor education, and family breakdown. Drug abuse is usually a means of escape for those in poverty, suffering the ills of family breakdown as a consequence of incarceration. Therefore, treating drug abuse does little, in most cases, to change the root causes of resorting to drug abuse. Addressing poverty or family breakdown directly is futile; these are effects of other causes. That leaves education.

Caroline Wolf Harlow, a statistician with the U.S. Department of Justice, found that 59% of persons in federal facilities and 75% in state prisons are high school dropouts. U.S. Department of Justice, in a 2003 Bureau of Justice Special Report, noted 65% of prisoners lacked a high school diploma, 23% graduated and a scant 13% had any college education.

Socially, this equates to over half of all dropouts being unemployed; according to a study by Prison Policy and Northeastern University. On average, incarcerated people had an annual income 40% less than the median income of their non-dropout, non-incarcerated contemporaries. Not graduating or dropping out either leads to imprisonment and incarceration to family breakdown. Therefore, addressing the educational factors will produce the greatest possible positive effects.

**Kathleen Bender, with the Center for American Progress, explained that “for every dollar spent on prison education, taxpayers are estimated to save four or five dollars that would have been spent on incarceration.”** In economic terms, around 60 billion dollars of labor loss because the U.S. focuses on incarceration.

There are several other benefits to investing in education as a method to combat crime and our untenable use of incarceration. Besides reducing poverty, education can improve generational outcomes for families. For society and prisoners, the impact of education is even bigger. In 2016, RAND Corporation found prisoners who participated in education programs while incarcerated were 43 % less likely to recidivate. Nationally, the recidivism rate is about 60%. In Arizona, figures showed

post-education programs participants had a mere ten percent recidivism rate. Consider the societal impacts.

On the one hand, it costs about \$14,000 for an online Bachelor's degree. That degree opens the doors to immense economic opportunities and social mobility leading out of poverty-drug abuse-crime-incarceration family breakdown cycles and into benefits of a more robust economy, less dependence on government and aid programs, safer society, less crime, and decreased need to incarcerate.

On the other hand, it costs almost triple that same online degree to incarcerate someone, yearly, for committing a crime. This expense applies across the board from low-level to high profile violent offenders.

Upwards of 95% of all people incarcerated today will one day return to society. What happens today future wrongs, warehoused in a facility for however long then, released back into society in almost identical circumstances except they have aged and possibly earned a GED. The conditions which made for their criminality still exist and, generally, they reoffend.

The Vera Institute of Justice, in 2016, noted only 35% of state prisons provided college-level education programs and these are only made available to a minuscule six percent of prisoners nationwide. More shocking is what the U.S. Sentencing Commission found: nearly 61% of those who did not complete high school were rearrested while those with college degrees were at under 20%. The current employment of incarceration is a massive disservice to society.

In 2017, New York awarded more than seven million dollars to colleges there – including Cornell and New York Universities – to provide prison classes. California has been engaged in similar activities for years and, there is aforementioned Arizona. Along with Connecticut, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and South Carolina. California and New York are among the states that have successfully reduced their prison populations without detrimental effects on public safety. Many different approaches were used but one common to all were educational programs. Also was bipartisan efforts in state legislators and executive branch initiatives.

Smart in crime means acknowledging the social ill our over-reliance on incarceration has created. Incarceration does not solve the crime. As the foregoing illustrates, addressing the prevalence of poor education among prisoners has the greatest potential. Socially, in terms of recidivism, crime public safety, stronger economy. Individually, regarding family breakdown, drug abuse, poverty. If the last four-plus decades have demonstrated anything, they clearly show: It costs less to educate than incarcerate.